

U.S. Senator Jon Tester
Montana's Women Veterans of WWI Congressional Record Citation
October 30, 2017

Mr. / Madam President, I rise today to honor the hundreds of Montana women who honorably served our country during World War I.

They braved the German U-Boats to serve on the front lines. Women cared for the wounded and connected calls to the battlefield offices of General John Pershing. Without them, the American force serving in Europe could have faced catastrophe. Without them, the course of the war could have been much different.

But we shouldn't be surprised. Montana women have been breaking down barriers for generations.

Merle Egan Anderson pressured the U.S. government for 60 years to get the women who worked the Army's telephone switchboards the status of "veteran."

Montanans like Merle Egan Anderson and Lena Roy volunteered to be a part of the Army Signal Corps without promise of pay, benefits or recognition of their service. The Signal Corps women, nicknamed the "Hello Girls," proved their worth immediately. Merle, Lena and their peers' speed and precision allowed officers to communicate across battlefields, enemy lines, and war-torn terrain.

They served at the front lines and quickly garnered the respect of the men with whom they served. They braved enemy fire and suffered casualties among their ranks. Despite their outstanding service, they returned to an indifferent government who denied them veteran status, including health care and burial rights.

Merle Egan Anderson took on the government and 60 years later, she won. When the government granted the "Hello Girls" veteran status, only 18 of the 223 women were still alive.

Nearly 200 Montana nurses entered military service, 86 of whom braved enemy submarine-patrolled waters to care for troops on the front line. They came from 56 cities, towns and forgotten railroad stops across the Big Sky State.

Nurses Elizabeth Sandelius from Cokedale and Harriett O'Day from Billings were cited for heroism under fire for their service in France. Cora Craig from Glasgow, Montana, received a silver medal from the King of Siam for her care of soldiers from present-day Thailand. Eula Butzerin braved the carnage of post-war France to find the battlefield grave of her brother Roy, marked only with a stick and his dog tags.

Thirteen Montana women enlisted in the Navy and served stateside. Gertrude Zerr from Chinook achieved the rank of Chief Yeoman, directing fellow Yeoman in the naval headquarters.

During the war, these women proved to their fellow Americans and the world that women were an asset in battle. Their service defied gender stereotypes and helped changed the tide of public opinion that culminated in the 19th Amendment of our Constitution, granting women the right to vote at long last. They helped pave the way for women to take on combat roles in World War II and beyond.

After the war, Montana's World War I women veterans faded into history. Their service remains largely unknown.

But these women gave voice and power to a nation of women. Their service and actions helped change the course of history. These strong Montana women were followed by more strong Montana women who have carried the fighting torch of equality for generations.

It's my honor to present this legacy today, and my privilege to represent the past and present women of Montana.

Mr. President on behalf of a grateful nation, I commend Montana's women veterans of WWI.

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